

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on
Oversight Hearing on
the implications to public domain national forest should a bill to require the appointment of the Chief of the Forest Service by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate

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Society of American Foresters

Before the

House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

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Madam Chairman, my name is Michael Moore, Chair of the Committee on Forest Policy of the Society of American Foresters (SAF), and the former Director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. The over 18,000 members of the Society constitute the scientific and educational association representing the profession of forestry in the United States. SAF's primary objective is to advance the science, technology, education, and practice of professional forestry for the benefit of society. I, and the members of SAF, are ethically bound to advocate and practice land management consistent with ecologically sound principles. I am especially pleased to be here today to comment on your bill requiring Senate confirmation of the chief of the USDA Forest Service, and to thank the Subcommittee for its continued support of professional forestry. I thank the Chair for the opportunity.

The Society of American Foresters supports attempts to de-politicize the Forest Service, and to ensure the Chief is a natural resource professional. However, if the Chief is subject to change every four years when a new individual resides in the White House, we believe the long-term nature of forest management is likely to suffer. Forest management does not coincide with election cycles and short term political objectives. If a new Chief is appointed every time an administration changes, there is a potential negative impact to the long-term management goals for the forests entrusted to the Forest Service by the people of the United States.

SAF is the organization that represents the broad profession of forestry, which, in turn is responsible for the long-term health and productivity of our nation's forests. The Society of American Foresters believes land and resource management is best addressed by long term management objectives and activities. In order to meet long-term objectives and ensure the stewardship of the nation's federal lands, we believe consistent nonpartisan professional leadership is necessary in all natural resource management agencies. The Chief of the Forest Service should be a nonpartisan, competitively qualified professional who has broad resource management experience, knowledge of the agency and its operations, and should provide stable long-term leadership. This individual needs to understand and have sensitivity for the political process, but he or she must have extensive natural resource training and experience.

Using the Scientific Knowledge and Technical Skills of the Forestry Profession to Benefit Society

The Congress established federal land and resource management agencies and departments, such as the USDA Forest Service to protect, conserve, and manage the nation's natural resources. These agencies have traditionally been staffed by career civil servants. The natural resource professionals employed by these agencies practice their profession relatively free from political pressures, with freedom to apply their professional judgment and technical expertise to implement scientifically validated management practices.

Foresters should practice what is good for the land, not what is good for a political agenda.

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, which created the Senior Executive Service (SES), changed the structure and hiring practices for high level personnel in the executive branch. Professionals at the SES level are trained to step into almost any top managerial, supervisory, or policy position in the executive branch. SES positions are designated as "career reserved" or "general." Career reserved positions can only be filled by career appointees and may be assigned from within or outside of the agency. This practice tries to ensure public confidence in government impartiality. General positions can be filled by career, non-career, or limited appointment (political or confidential) personnel. SAF believes the Chief of the Forest Service should continue to be appointed through the career reserved SES process.

Many worry about the possibility of political appointees leading land management agencies, giving rise to potential conflicts between long term forest management goals and short term political objectives. Those who want to ensure allegiance to organizational and professional objectives, including long term management objectives, often believe in hiring career professionals involved in the civil service system from within an agency. Others believe that for organizations to grow more creatively and respond well to current situations, including the desire of Administrations to implement their policies, political appointments are needed to guide agency efforts. The trade-offs are often between meeting political goals of the current Administration, and the consistency and predictability in long term management strategies. If long-term health of our nation's forest lands is our goal, we must give greater weight to choosing natural resource professionals to lead natural resource management agencies.

As you deliberate further on this bill, the Society of American Foresters suggests you consider expanding the qualifications necessary for appointing a chief as outlined in H.R. 817. While the requirements you list are not at all prescriptive or burdensome, we believe you could go further. Perhaps you could require a candidate for chief be a:

1. graduate of an SAF-accredited bachelor or graduate forestry curriculum, or
2. scientist or practitioner who holds a bachelor's or higher degree in the broad field of forestry and who has three or more years of qualifying experience within the broad field of forestry.

We suggest you add these requirements to your bill, and that the committee ask for the input of other natural resource professional societies when considering expanding the legislative requirements of a candidate for chief

In conclusion, we strongly support your attempts to de-politicize federal land management. The Society of American Foresters believes the chief of the Forest Service should be a natural resource professional. Senate confirmation will only lead to the further politicization of the Agency, to the detriment of long-term forest management objectives. Ultimately these objectives are set by forest landowners, in the case of the USDA Forest Service, these landowners are the citizens of the United States.

Thank you Madam Chairman for the opportunity to share our views with you and the Committee today. It has been an honor to be before you representing professional foresters.

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